

★ ATEST

User Guide



User Guide

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Introduction of the ATEST project and problems solved during the project period

Since the beginning of the LLP/Erasmus programme, student mobility has also focused on traineeships (work placements, internship) in institutions abroad. The traineeship programme under the Erasmus+ programme has been further extended to another group of participants - recent graduates who may complete their traineeship during the 12 months after graduation, provided that they have been selected for the traineeship during their studies.

The increasing importance of Erasmus traineeships stresses the need for quality and relevance for the assessment. While for the Erasmus mobility study programme the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is settled, there is a lack of guidelines and precise rules for the assessment of traineeships (quality assurance based on ECTS or other form of credits), relating to non-compulsory (voluntary) traineeship activities.

The current practice used for assessment and recognition of traineeship results shows us huge differences between universities and also within an individual university (among different departments). Based on analyses made by project participants, we can see large differences in the manner of allocating credits for traineeships performed within the Erasmus programme (from 0 ECTS to 30 ECTS within the same period of traineeship). It is important to have a common or similar system for assessment of traineeship programmes which will bring similar methods used for assessment and recognition of traineeship results.

Why we need a system for assessment of traineeships through the ECTS

If traineeship is a part of the curriculum, credits (ECTS) are specified in the study plans but many traineeships are voluntary activities, separate from the compulsory part of study. Traineeship activities are supported by the EU Commission mainly to improve students' prospects in the labour market after the theoretical training during their studies. There are no differences between voluntary and mandatory internships and both forms of traineeships are supported. The problem of accumulation of credits appears when students are participating in traineeship activities outside of the regular study programmes (out of curricula) and the traineeship is seen as a voluntary activity (optional, not mandatory) which is only an additional activity of students added to their study programme.

If we accept the Erasmus traineeship programme as an integral part of study, it must be evaluated in accordance with recognized rules. While the assessment of study activities is based on ECTS, traineeship activities have no rules governing how to evaluate and recognize participation in Erasmus traineeships under the ECTS.

The problem is not limited to the academic recognition of traineeship activities, it is also a problem for students to understand why the system is not clear and why each university uses its own system for using ECTS for traineeship assessment. There are companies which accommodate students from various universities and from several European Union countries at the same time and these students discuss in particular the amount of their Erasmus grants and also the proposed number of credits for the traineeship.

Erasmus coordinators frequently encounter questions from students, about why their traineeship was rated lower than the traineeship of students from other countries or universities. For each Erasmus coordinator it is very hard to answer these questions if there are no rules for assessment. If the coordinator is unable to sufficiently justify the rating system with references to the EU rules, the assessment of internships becomes unreliable and negatively affects the image of the European Union.

Erasmus mobility activities

There are two forms of Erasmus mobility activities – study and traineeship and each has its own rules and specifications. Both activities are based on a document called Learning Agreement (for Study or for Traineeship).

The study programme is an approved set of modules or course units recognized for the award of a specific university degree (Bachelor, Master or Doctoral). It is defined through the learning outcomes (expressed in terms of competences) that need to be achieved in order to obtain credits (ECTS) for finalisation of a university degree. Any university study is based on various activities which are aimed at obtaining a predetermined number of credits (ECTS) regardless of the fact that a part of study is realised through the Erasmus programme abroad at a partner university and due to the system of transferring credits the ECTS are transferred from one university to another one. Compulsory traineeship is one of the teaching methods which is a part of the regular study programme (credits are specified in curricula).

While Erasmus study mobility activities are based on bilateral agreements between universities, Erasmus traineeship activities (compulsory and also voluntary) are realised in institutions abroad without bilateral agreements (bilateral agreements for traineeships are exceptions). Traineeships are activities for students to acquire practical skills within their study programmes and only compulsory traineeships are components of curricula, while voluntary traineeships have no credit rating and if a university allocates the ECTS for participation in voluntary traineeship, these credits are not part of the regular ECTS and become so-called additional ECTS beyond the prescribed limit (over 30 or 60 ECTS).

Obligatory and voluntary traineeship activities

According to the ATEST project partners, 4 different types of university traineeships can be described:

1. **Compulsory traineeships – with “credits for traineeship”:** the traineeship is a mandatory component of the curriculum of study and credits for traineeship are therefore recognized in the curriculum itself. In this case the number of recognized credits is established by the rules of the degree in compliance with the national legislation for higher education systems.
2. **Optional traineeship – with “credits for elective activities”:** the traineeship isn't a mandatory component of the curriculum study, but nevertheless, some credits are recognized in the curriculum as elective activities (courses). Also, in this case the number of recognized credits is established by the rules of the degree in compliance with the national legislation for higher education systems.
3. **Optional traineeship – with credits “recognized extra-curricular”:** the traineeship isn't a mandatory component of the curriculum of study, and therefore credits are recognized only as supplementary credits for extra-curricular activities. This means that this surplus of credits typically falls outside of the student's required courses and area of study, or it is not needed under any other section of the academic evaluation: it can just complement the degree.
4. **Optional traineeship – with no recognition of credits:** the traineeship isn't a mandatory component of the curriculum of study. Thus, credits are not recognized either as a part of the curriculum nor as a surplus of credits. However, the learning outcomes achieved through non-compulsory traineeships could be documented, for example, in student's Transcript of Records, in the Diploma Supplement or in the Europass Mobility document (mainly for graduates, for whom no other way of recognition exists).

Of course we should consider the differences between business schools/ universities of applied sciences and universities: in the first case, the traineeship is mainly a compulsory part of the curriculum from the very beginning; in the latter case, traineeship activities have been introduced only recently in order to enable students to better fit the labour market requirements.

Communication with companies and assessment of traineeships

The successful implementation of traineeships is derived from good partner institutions and companies that have an interest in good preparation of the students and graduates. In particular it is necessary to look for such institutions or companies, which are rather focused on professional training more than obtaining cheap workers on low-skilled labour. These companies must be interested in cooperating on the preparation of a detailed Learning Agreement for Traineeship and its subsequent compliance. Good institutions and companies want to know the purpose and the objective of traineeship, which the university must specify in the Learning Agreement for Traineeship. Such cooperation brings real results and for students and graduates it is the best way to get the professional skills that can complement their theoretical knowledge from university.

We are talking about the evaluation of traineeships through the ECTS which is important for each student and university. On the other hand, the ECTS is a completely unknown form of traineeship evaluation for institutions. Institutions or companies cannot propose the number of credits but may objectively assess the practical experience gained during the traineeship.

When an institution or company is considering employing a university graduate, it does not care about the number of ECTS obtained but rather the specific theoretical and practical knowledge of the graduate.

The final evaluation of the traineeship must contain detailed information on the professional skills obtained as well as having information about the social behavior of the student or graduate.

How to assess voluntary traineeships

The current practice used for assessment and recognition of traineeship results shows us huge differences not only among different universities, but also within the same institution (e.g. among different departments). Above all, we can see large differences in the manner of allocating credits for traineeships performed within the Erasmus programme (from 0 ECTS to 30 ECTS within the same period of traineeship). It is important to have a common system for assessment of the traineeship programme which will bring similar methods used for assessment and recognition of traineeship results.

The European Commission points out that “in the particular case of a traineeship that is not part of the curriculum of the student, the sending institution shall provide recognition at least by recording this period in the Diploma Supplement or, in the case of recent graduates, by providing a traineeship certificate”¹. However, there are no commonly adopted clear rules, as in the mobility for studies, for quality assurance of traineeships based on a credit system (ECTS or other form of credits) for assessment and recognition, nor for its record on students’ academic files.

On the one hand, traineeships will become more attractive for university students if a clear assessment of their traineeships is used and the results are recognised as a regular part of study. On the other hand, it should also be remembered traineeships are primarily subject to two different sets of regulations, one at the student’s home institution and country, and the second in the country of the host company. In addition, European regulations and other legislative frameworks also add a higher level of complexity to the problem of traineeship assessment and recognition.

With regards to the ECTS system, the ATEST project suggests reviewing the ECTS system considering there is a different workload in the case of study activities compared to the case of traineeship. If for study the relation is 1 credit for 25/30 hours of work, for traineeship the ATEST project proposes 1 credit for 50/60 hours. The amount of credits should depend on the length (number of hours) of the traineeship: however, we suggest only a minimum number of credits to be recognized not a maximum.

¹ Erasmus+ Traineeship web information provided by the European Commission, available at: http://ec.europa.eu/education/opportunities/higher-education/traineeships_en.htm

On top of that, the ATEST project considers the quality assessment of the trainee through the final Transcript of Records and/or through any other assessment documents as a very important part of each traineeship. Credits should not be applied if the conditions of the training agreement are not fulfilled. However, the performance of the student (if sufficient) should not influence the number of credits allocated to the traineeship, but only the final mark – if any (in some cases no mark is foreseen, only PASSED or FAIL).

To help develop a set of transparent criteria for assessing non-compulsory/ compulsory work placements the following tools could be implemented:

- developing an **official university internal regulation** for assessment of non-compulsory traineeship and for allocating ECTS credits;
- ensuring - before its approval - that **the traineeship is consistent with and content-related to the course of study** and the placement environment supports the student in achieving the outcomes. The traineeship should be assessed on clearly defined outcomes, should require appropriate supervision and a placement experience suitably designed to complement the degree learning outcomes;
- requiring students to complete a **traineeship diary**: in this way the evaluation of the traineeship can be done on the basis of workload achieved (based on hours);
- requiring the student to complete an **initial appraisal form (e.g. within two weeks from the beginning of the traineeships) and an intermediate appraisal form (halfway)**;
- ensuring a **closely monitored reporting of the traineeship**: after each traineeship, the student and the company should evaluate the experience. From the companies’ side, a survey should be completed by the mentor of the student and from the students’ side (e.g. a brief report answering specific questions about the experience);
- ensuring appropriate supervision throughout the traineeship, both academic and practitioner, with regular feedback to students;
- **ongoing and final evaluation should be done by the university supervisor** on the basis of the appraisal forms and of the **final traineeship certificate**. The final traineeship certificate confirms that the traineeship has been successfully completed and only through this document we should proceed in the recognition of credits. In case the student does not fulfil the conditions of the Training Agreement, the traineeship should

not be recognized and the student should pay back the grant (or a part of the grant). The above mentioned measure should be stated in the grant agreement signed between the student and the home institution;

- developing a set of assessment criteria that are fit for the purpose of measuring the intended learning outcomes and be capable of moderation;
- ensuring **recognition of credits** within the University's internal online didactic system, with credits for "other activities" (i.e. activities that are optional for the student like elective credits) or as a surplus of credits (extra curriculum credits). If this is not possible (mainly for graduates) ensuring that the **traineeship is recorded in the Diploma Supplement or in the Europass Mobility document**.

Traineeship for graduates - new possibilities in Erasmus+

Since 2014 the traineeship under the Erasmus+ programme has been further extended to another group of participants: recent graduates who have the option to do their traineeship during the 12 months after graduation, provided that they have been selected for the traineeship before completing their studies.

Maximum mobility duration for each cycle is 12 months and an Erasmus traineeship can last from a minimum of 2 months to a maximum of 12 months. So graduates that have already done Erasmus mobility for studies of 10 months or less, are entitled to do a traineeship.

This type of internship belongs to the 4th group of traineeships, which is optional traineeship with no ECTS credit recognition. Because the graduate's academic record has already been closed, the traineeship cannot be documented in the Transcript of Records; nor can it be documented in the Diploma Supplement. However, the European Commission recommends recording the internship in the trainee's Europass Mobility Document. Europass Mobility records the knowledge and skills acquired in other European countries.

It so happens that graduate traineeships are on the increase in recent years; more students prefer to wait until after graduation before performing an Erasmus+ work placement, instead of doing it during the course of their studies.

However, the survey carried out by ATEST project partners showed that it is not common practice at universities to record the traineeships under the Europass transparency framework. One might think that the graduate who has completed an Erasmus+ internship is doubly disadvantaged: the traineeship cannot be documented in the student's academic file, nor in the Diploma Supplement. This situation might discourage students performing an internship period and to perceive it as being of little value.

The ATEST partners believe that all the learning outcomes achieved through Erasmus+ work-placements by graduates should then also be documented in the Europass Mobility document. Traineeships will then become more attractive for university students if a clear description of their traineeships, and the results obtained are well documented.

Final practical remarks

For practical purposes it is necessary not only to know the rules of the Erasmus+ programme but also not to be afraid to use its own additional conditions for participants of internships. So that we can implement the traineeship program successfully regardless of whether the internships are mandatory or voluntary, we offer a simple procedure (summary) for the workers of international offices actively involved in the Erasmus program traineeship.

1. Offer only internships which guarantee benefit for students or graduates. But it does not mean that the students themselves cannot find a company or an institution for their traineeships. Give them a chance to find it themselves and then you only need to check the quality of the foreign institution and the Learning Agreement for Traineeship but the applicant must be transparently selected for the placement.
2. Determine own selection criteria for participation in traineeship. Watch the linguistic knowledge of applicants and compliance of the study field with the contents of the traineeship. It is good to insert additional conditions into the contract with a student (confirm e.g. within 2 weeks after the initiation of traineeship that the content of the traineeship corresponds to the Learning Agreement for Traineeship).
3. Health and liability insurance is one of the most important documents for participation in traineeship, which must be declared before the traineeship will start.
4. Learning Agreements for Traineeships are the most important documents for the exercise of traineeship. It is therefore necessary to ensure that such agreements have been processed in great detail and only in this way is it possible to require compliance in practice.
5. During the traineeship keep communication not only with your student or graduate but also with the institutions (companies) and all problems should be solved immediately. If necessary, do not hesitate to visit the institution abroad (financial resources are in the budget of the Erasmus+ Programme). In the event of a serious problem do not be afraid to terminate the traineeship, especially when requested by the student himself. It is better to stop the traineeship now than to deal with even more serious problems later.
6. The exact period of the traineeship must be confirmed by the foreign institution. It is also important to have detailed evaluation of the activities and newly acquired competence of student in the field in accordance with

the Learning Agreement for Traineeship. The confirmation of traineeship period and detailed evaluation of the activities should be used as a base for traineeship recognition and mainly for assessment of traineeship within the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System – ECTS.

7. While the ECTS are set out for mandatory traineeships in the curricula, voluntary traineeships should be free to choose their own system (until the EU provides uniform rules for the allocation of the ECTS also for voluntary traineeships). When creating rules for the assessment of traineeships, use proven methods and update them with additional criteria. It is possible to introduce compulsory interviews for all traineeship participants or only for students whose assessment is rather negative. It is also possible to introduce writing of essays and their evaluation by university tutors. The duration of traineeships and other evaluation criteria can be a good base for the responsible evaluation of traineeships and an objective allocation of credits which is proposed by ATEST team in the case of a voluntary traineeship (1 ECTS is recommended for 50 – 60 working hours).
8. Remember that a voluntary traineeship for which students receive ECTS, cannot be a part of the mandatory credits earned, but can only be credits beyond those required ECTS (over 30 or 60 ECTS compulsory credits for a semester or academic year).
9. Traineeship is recorded in the Diploma Supplement or in the Europass Mobility document. It is not important if the traineeship is compulsory or voluntary. The learning outcomes achieved through Erasmus+ traineeships by graduates should be documented in the Europass Mobility document (it is the only way for graduates). Universities can also give students and graduates a certificate confirming the completion of the traineeship.
10. For students, the grant amount and its payment are very important. In the case of traineeships it is advised not to pay the full grant before but only a part of it (e.g. 80%) and the rest can be paid once the student has met the conditions of the traineeship. This is especially important in the case of graduates. Remember that the first grant installment shall be paid no later than the traineeship starts.
11. Another important task of the international office staff is the ongoing promotion of traineeships and the dissemination of results including assessment methods not only within the university but also outside the university and it is necessary to maintain contact with the institutions and companies involved in traineeships.

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Na Moklině 289/16,
163 00 Praha 6
Czech Republic
www.educaops.eu

THE PREPARATION OF THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN UNDERTAKEN BY

Josef Vochozka
Vladimíra Řeháčková
Lorena Zanelli
Francesca Briani
Lorenza Zuccatti
Marjo van der Valk
Gorka Orueta Estivariz
Ulrike Sauckel
Renáta Timková

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